

# How to Develop a Successful Social Media Strategy

Jennifer Nelson

**KEYWORDS:** Sales, Marketing, Advertising, Social Media & Networks, Marketing.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is part of Lessons from Leaders, a Next Avenue initiative made possible by the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation (<https://www.schulzefamilyfoundation.org/>) and EIX (<https://eiexchange.com/>), the Entrepreneur Innovation Exchange.*

Social media marketing and digital PR can be essential to the success of small businesses by developing their brand, boosting their online visibility and connecting them with prospective customers.

"The most important thing any small business can do with their social media accounts is to humanize their brand," says Nora Salama, an entrepreneur and co-founder of [Appareify](https://appareify.com/) (<https://appareify.com/>), a custom clothing manufacturer.

"Instead of focusing too much on promoting your products or services, you should make an effort to show off your company culture and the people behind it," she says.

For instance, small-business owners could show what happens at the office, introduce their people to their customers, even share amusing faux pas.

Genuine social activity isn't about posting ads or making sales pitches. Instead, tell stories, say what you stand for and post valuable tips, advice and commiserations. Cultivate mentors — experienced business owners willing to share their wisdom with you — to talk online about how you have grown in the time they have known you.

"I've had great mentors throughout my career, says Paige Arnof-Fenn, founder & CEO of [Mavens & Moguls](http://mavensandmoguls.com/) (<http://mavensandmoguls.com/>), a global strategic marketing consulting firm. "In my corporate life I had bosses, senior women or alums from my alma maters who took me under their wings to help me advance and show me the ropes."

## Tips from Mentors

On her own, as a small business owner, she says she found mentors have been "invaluable sources of inspiration, advice and encouragement" who helped her avoid rookie mistakes with key tasks such as hiring and fundraising.

Here are some other thoughts from social media marketing veterans.

Develop a consistent message across all social media and live it every day. "Become known as a reliable source with social media profiles and personas that tell the same story," says Arnof-Fenn. "If you appear to be serious or buttoned up on one site and a comedian on another, it can be confusing and dilute your brand."

Messaging should always sound like you and the brand you've built, whether it is polished or informal, chatty or academic. Not everyone will like or hire you, but Arnof-Fenn says it is important to make sure that those who do like you feel a connection and that you give them a reason to remember you when they need help. "Authenticity is the key; it has to be and feel real for it to work."

Arnof-Fenn said accepting the fact that everyone will not like or hire her was one of the best lessons she learned from the mentors in her life. "Their advice has helped me be thick skinned, brave, kind and smart, which has helped me succeed both as an entrepreneur and within organizations," she says.

## Pay It Forward

She honors her mentors (<https://www.nextavenue.org/rural-renaissance/>) by



helping others in the same way. "I have mentored a number of employees and people starting their careers over the years," she says. "Mentoring can be a wonderful experience on both sides of the equation. It is important to both give back and pay it forward."

To stay relevant and top-of-mind to your audience, it's important to post consistently — at least once a day on visual-centric platforms like Instagram and Facebook. However, while a regular presence is crucial, don't sacrifice quality. Make sure every post adds value and reflects your brand.

Social media is just that, social. It's a two-way street, notes Kora Lee Pearson, team leader of strategic partnerships at [PorchLyte Real Estate](https://porchlyte.com/) (<https://porchlyte.com/>), a social media marketing site for real estate. "It's not just about broadcasting your listings or services, but about fostering relationships with your audience," she says.

Engage in conversations, respond to comments, and show genuine interest in audience opinions to make your followers feel they are valued and that their feedback matters to your company.

"This approach not only helps to personify your brand but also nurtures a sense of community, trust and loyalty," Pearson says.

Ninety percent of your content should be non-promotional, says Robin Agricola, CEO and founder of [Birdhouse Marketing & Design](https://birdhousemarketing.com/) (<https://birdhousemarketing.com/>), which specializes in social media marketing for small businesses.

"Skip the self-promotional superlatives and focus on educating your audience or inspiring them," she says. "This is how you build trust with your audience, position your brand as a thought-leader and industry authority, and slowly weave yourself into the fabric of your audience's daily lives."

## Describe Your Brand in 3 Words

To determine the type of tone to take in your social content, come up with three — and only three — adjectives that you would like your audience to use to describe your brand. "Approachable, playful,

trustworthy, upscale — get creative with it, but remember just three," says Agricola.

As you develop social media content, website, email or any other business materials, ask yourself, Is this content aligned with our three adjectives? "Maintaining brand integrity is important for building trust with an audience," she says. "They need to see a consistent look, feel, tone, and message in all your marketing."

With Instagram and Facebook targeting, make a list of common questions and problems you see from customers and create content around it, targeting people that social media channels deem interested in your product.

## Try the Indirect Approach

"You can target 'dumbbells,' and serve people content ads for free dumbbell workouts. This brings many people to our page; they join our email list, and eventually purchase," says Jay Perkins, cofounder of [Living Fit](https://www.living.fit/) (<https://www.living.fit/>), a site for high-quality equipment and workout courses.

Product ads on social media have yet to perform well for his company. "You are in effect just sticking an ad in front of someone's face without them having the intent to buy a product," Perkins says.

He learned to publish and advertise helpful content instead of product ads. "This way we built our following and community larger, which leads to more sales over time," he says.

Visual content is a pivotal element of successful social media marketing for small businesses. Photos and videos are the most engaging content on the Web. Social media analytics tools such as [Iconsquare](https://www.iconsquare.com/) (<https://www.iconsquare.com/>) and [Instagram Insights](https://help.instagram.com/788388387972460) (<https://help.instagram.com/788388387972460>) can see which kind of visual content attracts the largest audiences, and when.

## Hashtags and Humor

The impact of your social media marketing material can

have greater reach with hashtags, which are robust social media tools. People can follow specific hashtags on multiple sites and will see your posts with that hashtag even if they don't follow your business. Your content may reach users who wouldn't ordinarily see it, which can be a boon for sales. #bigbusiness

"Humor on social media is the number one way to break the ice and take a shortcut to people's trust," says Eugenia Mikulan, known on social media as [@mangohallucinates](https://www.instagram.com/mangohallucinates) (<https://www.instagram.com/mangohallucinates/?hl=en>). She provides consulting and social media managing for small businesses.

"When young people see brands making fun of themselves or even being transparent about past mistakes, it lifts the veil of skepticism and allows the audience to see you as you are," she says. Showing how you run your business authentically and with humor will make people assume that if you're honest about your flaws, you are honest about your business.

## Check Your Competition

"I would recommend devoting some of your time to learning about the social media strategies employed by your primary competitors," says James Rochester, chief financial officer at [CashBlog](https://cashblog.com/) (<https://cashblog.com/>), a financial educational website.

"Examine the social media sites they rely on the most, the kinds of information they post and the frequency with which they publish," he advises. Completing this evaluation will enable you to see how your competitors use social media and indicate areas where you can differentiate yourself. For example, if your top competitor doesn't post much on Twitter, could you have the advantage by posting there?

No matter which social media tactics your business tries, with a consistent social media marketing strategy, you can make genuine connections, build trust with your audience and start conversations. And those conversations create opportunities for your business.

## Find Lessons in Mistakes

The most important step to take is to get in the game. Agricola learned that from her first boss, whom she met

as an intern and stayed with for seven years after graduating from college. "He taught me so much, not just about branding and marketing, but also about [entrepreneurship](https://www.nextavenue.org/hope-is-on-the-horizon-for-the-future-of-midlife-entrepreneurship/) (<https://www.nextavenue.org/hope-is-on-the-horizon-for-the-future-of-midlife-entrepreneurship/>)," she says.

"I was also able to learn from his mistakes, which was arguably more valuable than anything," Agricola adds. "For example, his failure to adapt to the advent of social media marketing — and the transition away from print — has kept me super on my toes. I hope to always stay on the cutting edge, even if I think something is 'just a passing trend.' "